



# Prize Poems

1942  
COMPETITION

Poetry Society of Winnipeg





25th Best Work

Ch. H. B. D. D. D.

J. D. D. D.

A2  
4.12

# ∞ Poems ∞

AWARDED PRIZES

AND

HONOURABLE MENTION

IN

DOMINION-WIDE COMPETITION

HELD BY

**The Poetry Society of Winnipeg**

MARCH 1942

---

---

Judges { DR. C. M. THOMPSON  
MR. G. L. BRODERSEN  
MR. CHESTER DUNCAN

# AWARDS

---

## FIRST PRIZE

Page

Wind in the Corn.....*John V. Hicks* (3)

## SECOND PRIZE

The Minstrel Ghost.....*Jean Paul Talbot*

The Society regrets that this prize-winning poem is too long to be given in its entirety and extracts would quite fail to represent it adequately.

## THIRD PRIZE

Two Peacocks.....*Jessie D. Boyd* (4)

## HONOURABLE MENTION

For a Dead Airman.....*Robina Monkman* (4)

Acquittance.....*John V. Hicks* (5)

The Old House.....*Jessie D. Boyd* (6)

Ballad of the Forget-me-not.....*John E. Nixon* (7)

Waiting .....*Mary E. Coleman* (9)

Blackout Over Damascus .....*Gertrude F. Baskine* (12)

## WIND IN THE CORN

Half way between my home and where I hastened  
Something within the misty Autumn air  
Brought me up short, at once remembering  
What I had meant to tell the odd-job man  
Whom I had left working the garden over,  
Raking it clean of old potato tops  
And shrivelled pea vines with their sticks and strings,  
Smoothing the plot for winter's carpet-laying.  
I dreaded lest I might be all too late,  
Even by speeding back the way I'd come,  
And find him rooting up the withered corn.  
For I had reckoned all the winter through  
On hearing what the wind would have to say  
To my two rows of parchment leaves and stalks  
When no more audient foliage was about;  
Because in summer time this graceful folk  
So busily employed within itself,  
Sucking the milk of the full-breasted earth,  
Laying white pearls along the cobs in rows,  
And spinning silken tassels all night long,  
Must hardly heed the singing wind—less so  
With fifty other songs opposing it.  
But after harvest, even later on  
When snow has spread a silence everywhere,  
And beauty is withdrawn into the ground,  
Being touched by sleep, then the once lovely leaves  
Are dry as death and ripe for talking to.  
The wind says things in winter you'd not guess.  
It was a good I did myself that day  
For hurrying back and putting one to rights  
About the wind and corn and what I wanted  
That ever after stood me well in stead,  
And in a final counting warded off  
What would have set me back a full year's living  
Had it gone unaccomplished. I own friends  
Would do nigh anything for me for asking,  
But none who'd leave two rows of dead corn grounded  
On into winter for no better reason  
Than that I might drop by from time to time  
And stand beside it when the wind was blowing.

*John V. Hicks*

## TWO PEACOCKS

Your ancestors  
In the gracious unhurried years,  
Trailed their plumes on lovely terraces,  
They listened to the music of fountains,  
To the song of the nightingale,  
The enraptured tones of lovers.

Today in the restricted space  
Of the provincial fair,  
Your milk-white plumage  
Is crushed at every turn,  
Your coronet is oddly at variance  
With your surroundings.

Your companion in captivity  
Drags a train of blue-green gilded feathers,  
And is consumed by excessive boredom.  
The raucous cries of farmyard dictators  
Are forced upon you  
While an overflow of plebian exhibition visitors  
Stare at you,  
And a little brown hen  
Loudly approves her achievement.  
Here in this stifling atmosphere  
You will languish for seven days  
And worry over the subtlety  
Of class distinction.

*Jessie D. Boyd*

## FOR A DEAD AIRMAN

He will look no more on the clover  
When the August whitethroats sing,  
Nor follow the restless plover,  
On the heart's unerring wing,  
Nor thrill to the geese going over  
In the miracle of spring.

He will walk no more in the hollow,  
In a dream half joy, half pain,  
When the swift, returning swallow  
Summons the April rain,  
And the bloodroot and violets follow—  
He will not glimpse again.

The furrows of brown earth turning  
Clean from the keen-edged share,  
And sweep of a black wing spurning  
The limitless leagues of air,  
The smoke of the dry leaves burning  
Where the sumach torches flare.

For rust is dark on the metals  
Of the blades that were sharp and true  
And his heart's half opened petals  
Are long since drowned in the dew,  
And the dust of the slow years settles  
Here on the books he knew.

No more shall he spin death under  
The arc of his wings at will,  
No more shall he hear the thunder  
Of guns from a distant hill  
Nor taste the essence of wonder  
When winds are suddenly still.

Out of his strange wild roaming  
Where the petrel dips and swings,  
Out of his ceaseless combing  
Of the seas for the serpent's rings,  
He has garnered this hour of homing  
This hour of folded wings. *Robina Monkman*

## ACQUITTANCE

But yesterday you came and begged of me  
A silver coin wherewith to buy a gun,  
Your heart's desire—an automatic one  
That had not to be loaded clumsily  
But held a roll of fifty powder caps  
At once. And you would aim at me, and fire;  
And as I fell I'd reason, "He will tire  
Of this, and take a book again, perhaps."

I reasoned well, yet did not understand;  
For though you scaled the scholar's peak, to-day  
It is the toy I keep closely to hand,  
Thinking upon you, now that you are gone,  
And how the echoes of your childhood's play  
Resounded in Wake Island and Luzon.

*John V. Hicks*

## THE OLD HOUSE

There was a time  
When Flora a beautiful lady  
Carved from marble  
Presided over the fountain  
In the garden—  
Flora the goddess of flowers.  
There was a time  
When oak trees offered  
Their green seclusion for young Victorians,  
And the gardener brought to perfection  
The bloom of mignonette, lily of the valley  
And climbing roses.  
They distilled a subtle fragrance in the garden,  
When the love song of a robin  
Rose above the music of the fountain.  
The petite French governess  
Walking with her pupils would exclaim,  
“Ecoutez au chanson de cet oiseau-la.”  
Leghorn hats shaded the faces  
Of the three fair daughters of the house.  
Fingers of sunlight burnished their ringlets,  
And silken sashes girdled their muslin dresses.  
As they passed the large glass conservatory,  
The parrot would remind them  
Not to forget their manners.  
There was time  
When ladies richly gowned  
In velvet and satin brocade,  
Wearing long ostrich plumes in their hats,  
Stepped daintily from their carriages,  
The first and third Tuesday  
Of the month.  
On Mother’s calling days  
The three little girls  
Watched the callers from the nursery window  
And counted the carriages proudly.  
They liked to see  
The well groomed horses tossing their heads,  
The coachmen so rigid and proper,  
In their fine livery.  
They held long whips which curled at the top.  
On cold days  
Bearskin robes covered their knees.



Every calling day  
The three little girls  
Looked for the pretty lady  
Who wore royal ermine.  
There was a delicacy about her features,  
Her voice, her manners,  
And the slight scent of attar of roses.  
Sometimes the pretty lady  
Asked to see the children  
In the drawing room,  
Then calling day had been a success.

The trees,  
The conservatory and fountain  
Have vanished.  
The coachman, the carriages  
And the callers, have receded  
Into the shadowy mirror  
Of the past.

To-day the corridors of the old house  
Reek with the stale odor  
Of cabbage and garlic.  
There is an incessant blare of cheap radios.  
On the balconies,  
Bedraggled washing sways  
To the blatant honk, honk, honk,  
Of rickety cars.

*Jessie D. Boyd*

## BALLAD OF THE FORGET-ME-NOT

### *Armed Trawler out of Yarmouth*

We've run into port for a job o' paint,  
Yarmouth port and 'ome again.  
And none of us lives like a plaster saint;  
To-day we're 'ere and tomorrow we ain't  
So who in the 'ell 's to make complaint  
Out o' port and in again?

We mounted a gun—'twas a narrow fit—  
There in port and sailed again.  
And we spotted a sub and scored a 'it  
And downed a 'Un in a Messerschmitt,  
All in the way o' doing our bit  
Far from port at sea again.

There's me and Billy and Skipper Brown  
    (Into port and out again)  
Wot lost 'is son when the 'Ood went down,  
And whose mother was bombed in Yarmouth town,  
And 'e don't love Fritz, don't Cuthbert Brown,  
    Out o' port, to sea again!

And Billy is bo'sun and likewise cook,  
    While in port or out again;  
And 'e lacks one 'and wot a splinter took,  
Yet 'e pulls 'is weight with a good steel 'ook,  
And 'e always carries an old 'ymn book  
    In and out o' port again.

And me, wot is just turned seventeen,  
    'Ere in port from sea again.  
And I can't talk much o' the things I've seen  
Out where the water is white and green:  
But I saw the dead from the "Silver Queen"  
    Back to port and 'ome again.

Skipper Brown and Billy and me  
    Putting out o' port again.  
Seventeen, forty and sixty-three,  
Making an odd ship's company  
To sail 'twixt death and eternity  
    Out o' Yarmouth port again.

So, down yer beer to Forget-me-not!  
    Wish us back to port again.  
We'll meet 'em again with shot for shot  
Till they find our sting is a bit too 'ot,  
And remember the little Forget-me-not—  
    IF they come to port again!

*John E. Nixon*

## WAITING\*

Draw the blackout curtains close  
before the lamps are lit;  
set the gas-mask, warm coat  
electric torch and thermos kit  
at hand—and if there is no raid  
the tea will do for morning.

Now the nightly ritual begins.  
Omit no slightest motion  
of the accustomed rites,  
but spin them out  
making each trivial operation  
weighty with significance  
to blackout thought.

Now the hairbrush . . . fifty strokes  
long, slow and firm . . .  
Not one grey hair to show  
for all these years of nights . . .

He's getting ready too,  
but not for sleep;  
dear God, no, not for sleep . . .  
for in that sleep of death . . .  
Steady. Stop. That's the road to smash.  
Chins up! Thumbs up!  
Up and not down,  
and lend a helping hand . . .

That's the stuff,  
a helping hand to beauty:  
tested by leading dermatologists  
and positively guaranteed  
to bestow roseleaf complexion within thirty days . . .  
well, here's the twenty-ninth,  
watch for the great transformation scene to-morrow!

The cool caress of sheets . . .  
Now who said that before?  
Sounds Rupert Brookish . . .  
Lie quite straight and still, relaxed.

---

\*This poem has appeared in Canadian Poetry Magazine. Reprinted here by arrangement.

They're ready too.  
Maps conned, objectives set . . .  
If unable to identify target  
return with bombs intact . . .  
Mae Wests buckled on,  
engine tuned and purring sweetly.

Now I lay me down to sleep—  
There they go . . . one . . . two . . . three  
I pray the Lord his soul to keep—  
four . . . five . . . six  
If he should die before I wake  
I pray the Lord my soul to take—  
seven . . . eight . . . nine  
one large or three small arrowheads.

(The North Sea, turbulent, cold,  
death in ambush  
beneath each phosphorescent crest . . . )  
Switch off the light;  
these blackout curtains  
make the place so beastly close  
and dark . . .  
Darkness over all the land . . .  
Darkness over every land . . .

(Holland like a toy village  
left on the nursery floor  
when all the children are abed . . . )

How long the night.  
But all the nights were long,  
all the nights I've waited.  
I remember well  
crouching beneath a leopard skin  
in the darkest corner of the cave  
listening for his voice  
among the yelling voices of the tribe . . .  
(I wonder if there's much flak tonight,  
and if the black fuselage  
really absorbs the searchlight rays . . . )

And another time I recollect  
sitting by a fountain in Babylon  
beneath the stars  
straining my ears  
for his footsteps at the door.



I waited through the long Roman nights  
when he fought the Hun before  
for the clank of his armour,  
the clash of his shield laid down.  
(Why must he turn back to see  
if the target was squarely hit?  
Just that much better chance  
for ground batteries to score . . . )

How my ears have ached  
in heavy silence down the centuries  
for the sound of his horse's hooves:  
across the drawbridge with staccato clatter,  
down miry roads  
where the soft spatter of mud  
made a faint obligato  
to the rattle of musket and sabre,  
along the paved highway under summer moons  
or between banks of snow  
that glittered in the faint light of stars.

Then it was for the cough of his engine  
I strained my ears,  
and now for the drone of his plane.  
And all these centuries of nights are one,  
one long night of wating.

Surely dawn must be near.  
Dear God I've waited for the dawn  
since time began.

What's that? Oh, they're back, they're back . . .  
One . . . two . . . three . . .  
Why the pause . . . four,  
five, six . . . how that engine stutters . . .  
he's made it . . . seven . . . eight . . .  
eight . . . Oh God . . . eight . . .  
perhaps my count was wrong . . .  
it must have been . . .  
you know it can't have been . . .  
eight . . . eight . . . eight . . .  
God, dear God, there must be nine . . .  
You know there must be nine . . .

But morning's here,  
and there are only eight . . .

*Mary E. Coleman.*

## BLACKOUT OVER DAMASCUS

A city straddles the banks of the stream, Barada,  
So old, not even the Tell-El-Amarna tablets  
Reveal when man first lived, loved, and died there.  
Dimashka was its earliest name; then, Dammesek.  
But long before Abram pursued false kings  
Already it was known to Time as strong Damascus.  
Tempting it burst to view in its spatulate plain,  
Rich with fields of boisterous grains and cereals,  
Of compliant orchards dark with pistachio, pomegranate,  
While homes, hidden within vine-rampant courtyards  
Were guarded by the dunn and streamlined Antilibanas.  
Long years Damascus played buffer between Assyria  
And the lusty war-suckled kingdom of Israel.  
Envy, in a parched land, of babbling waters,  
Ran tempered with awe of miracle-working prophets.  
Many times Syria felt the manacles of the conqueror,  
But never Damascus. It held, an Inland Gibraltar,  
In snow and frost, east winds and torrid noons.  
It blazed in the neon of its day. Nomadic tribes  
Spurred it from the desert. Polyglot was its speech.  
Its luxury lured, delighted, and foreshadowed Paradise.  
And then, Alexander cataracted.

Woe to the city  
Bled from that day with the leeches of war and its hirelings.  
No longer would children flower carefree to manhood.  
The pleased waters ran flavored with acrid blood,  
And the useless mountains re-echoed the wail of women.  
Less than a flash in a sparkplug, Alexander vanished.

While Rome, under Trajan, swelled its Gargantuan orbit,  
Syria shrank to a province. But Christ had risen  
And death became life in the service of rival gods.  
Damascus sped from Paul to Caliphate,  
From Omayyad to Abbasid and to Seljuk,  
But ever the insouciant pink groves of apricot  
Bloomed in ache-provoking beauty by the Chrysorroas.  
At last came a different horde: not to conquer, but to save  
By the sword, in the name of the Cross: hungry Crusaders  
With faith and mail unequal to accipitral Saladin,  
Acclaimed for his chivalry.

His tomb in Damascus is small.  
A forgotten mosque in a forsaken garden.

Now twinkled  
On a kaleidoscopic film: the slant-eyed Mongol,  
The swarthy, dark-haired Egyptian, Mameluke Kotuz,  
The ferocious Timur who carried away all the smiths,  
The nameless despots whose word at the time bore lightning.  
Then, for centuries, history forgot Damascus.

To-day, cooing pigeons whirl about minarets,  
Bazaars and khans that sing the art of the Arabian.  
Art outraged and violated, as that Moorish jewel,  
The palace Azm, bombarded by the Victorious French.  
Hideous 'facades,' facile face-lifting of impostor,  
Seek to reconcile grudging, unimpassioned lines  
With fretted lattice, white domes and musical fountains  
And the town's latest bracelet is the blatant 'Boulevard de  
Baghdad.'

Much less come nomad and camel in desert dignity.  
The jingle of trams rivals the call of the muezzin,  
The shrieking railway now links to sea-swept Beirut.  
The caravans roll on greasy, uneasy wheels  
Across the historic sands of the Syrian wastes.  
No more are dried fruits esteemed: Pruna and Cottona,  
Lauded by attic Juvenal; nor the snow-cooled drink  
Known as 'flowing wine of Helbon' to Ezekiel,  
But as 'Chalybonian' to the dilettante Roman palate.

Forgotten is wood and glass work; despised the linens,  
Bright-coloured silks and cushions that piled great wealth.  
Disdained the Damascene filigree silver and gold,  
And spurned the skill of the Diocletian blade.  
In shops of 'The Covered Street Called Straight,' that runs  
From East to West under colonnade and awning,  
(Where, in the house of Judas, Paul was healed)  
Spill impatient goods come from over the seas.

To-day, man's space-eating birds and fire-spewing fish,  
Besides which Nature's shark and vulture are as the lamb,  
Exact food, concealed, inaccessible unguent  
That is compelled to flow from the bowels of the astonished  
earth.

And Damascus shoulders the shellpocked road to Iraq  
Dimashka. Dammesek. Surely these knew blackouts,  
Nights when the stars had strayed and the moon was  
kidnapped.

Men slept in the open; the skies boasted only deities.

From flare, in cupped hands, lights inflated to candles, lamps,  
And at last the mockery of our Tungsten ersatz-sun.  
Blackout! What thoughts oppress David, Solomon?  
Elisha who delivered up to his king an army  
Of Syrians smitten with supernatural blindness?  
And Tamerlane shrinks to hear himself called fierce:  
A pyramid of a million human skulls. . . .  
To-day, mothers and wives would sleep in peace,  
A monster, so easily satiated, to pacify.

Descendant of light was born the surreptitious bird  
Whose heart is human but harder than the steel of wings,  
Whose mind is of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Watchman,  
Watchman,  
What of the night?"—"Darkness, Darkness on Damascus."  
And overhead hastes fear, anguish and disaster  
With trail more hideous than any she has known before.

But, deathless, the beloved river babbles through the dark,  
The sheltering Antilibanas swell to the clouds,  
The fertile Ghutah is lush with sweeping vines,  
Almond smells heady in the early Springtime night,  
The fig-leaf spreads, the juicy ripe fruit is yielding.

Damascus sleeps. Damascus dreams and remembers  
Those hubris-smitten ants who grasped at her:  
Shalmaneser, Sargon, Bohemund, Allenby,  
Where are they now these names, as fugacious  
As Stuka, Spitfire, Dornier, Breda, Blenheim,  
That spit above the town, longest the witness  
Of man's travail, indifferent for having seen too much.  
Its eyes are closed, its ears are deaf.

Soul-sick

It cowers beneath the bombs, uplifts weary arms  
In the everlasting gesture of supplication:  
"Deliver us, O Lord, from all our enemies.  
Lord God of Mahomet. Lord God of Israel. O Christ!"

The answer spirals in the first streaked opal of dawn  
When the blackout dissolves before the eyes of day.  
The gluttoned vampires vanish. The nuclear planet  
That surveyed the rise of Dimashka, the fall of Dammesek.  
Life spreading, chariots its course across the heavens,  
And blazes on shamble and woe, on despair, on relief,  
On death, on birth, on age, on youth, on humanity,  
Star-gazing, star-reaching, earth-bound, mud-grovelling,  
Baffled, bewildered, besmirched, blundering, but uncrushable,  
Mounting in slow, tortured, elliptical steps  
Through wheels and spheres of morass, impasse, retrogression  
From slime to fin, to wing, to limb, to thought,  
Yes, rising! from chaos to truth, to ultimate freedom,  
To knowledge of the motive of life, and the goal of spirit!

Blackout . . . Damascus . . . Most modern of crowns for the  
mother  
Of cities, symbolic, by the golden-flowing Barada.

*Gertrude F. Baskine.*











